

Fans of St. Anthony's exult in wilderness

October 31, 2004 | Patriot-News, The (Harrisburg, PA) | MARCUS SCHNECK; Of the Patriot-News | Page 103

St. Anthony's Wilderness, a vast wild tract centered along Stony Creek in Dauphin and Lebanon counties, is spoken of with near sacred reverence by many of those who have trekked its untamed trails -- hunter, hiker and bird watcher alike.

The sanctity afforded that last stretch of true wilderness in southeastern Pennsylvania has come to the attention of the general public most recently through a proposal by the Pennsylvania National Guard to acquire a seven-mile slice from the current owner, the Pennsylvania Game Commission.

Discussions in the media and in public meetings at Fort Indiantown Gap have been framed in large abstractions about the area of State Game Lands 211 on the north side of Second Mountain that the Guard would like to have as a buffer zone for tank firing range on the opposite side of the mountain.

Nothing printed on paper or spoken in a meeting hall can do justice to St. Anthony's Wilderness.

To know the essence of the place, you must travel there and soak it in through your own senses. And, one of the best spots to gather an awesome overview of the acreage is the Second Mountain Hawk Watch, perched atop the mountain about a half-mile east of the tract the Guard has targeted.

Unlike many hawk watch sites across the state, Second Mountain offers views on both sides of the mountain.

To the south, on a clear day, the view extends more than 20 miles, to the Furnace Hills on the Lebanon-Lancaster county line. Woodlands interspersed with farmlands interspersed with small towns stretch out across the landscape.

But oh, to the north, the carpet of treetops that is the wilderness holds sway over a land that has beaten back the best attempts of coal, rail and tourist barons.

From that vantage point, a full 180-degree view of the wilderness, you can begin to share the sense of wonder at this place with those who question the Guard's proposal, even though that plan includes promises of no changes to the wild landscape.

Dedicated volunteers maintain a daily count of migrating birds from the site, which is part of the major migration corridor known as the Kittatinny Ridge, from September through October.

They're generally happy to help newcomers spot and identify the tiny specks in the sky that turn out to be eagles, hawks and falcons through their trained eyes.

The hawk watch is accessed from Cold Spring Road, which runs right past the tank **training range** as it climbs the south side of Second Mountain.

Atop the mountain, a gravel road leads away to the right of Cold Spring for about half a mile to a dead-end at the hawk watch parking area.

Directional signs for the hawk watch begin at state Route 443 and Clement Avenue at Fort Indiantown Gap.

MARCUS SCHNECK: (610) 562-1884 or mschneck@comcast.net. Schneck's outdoor writing also appears in The Patriot-News Sports section today and Wednesday, and at www.pennlive.com.